

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

New Jersey-- Single Access Point for Information on All Services for Older People

Issue: National Toll Free Number Offering New Jersey Information

Summary

The State of New Jersey has established a single entry system for long-term supports and other services for older people, including a toll-free telephone number for information and services. The system is designed to prevent peoples' frustrations at having to contact multiple offices in order to obtain information and services. The effectiveness of the system in each of New Jersey's 21 counties is evaluated through compliance with state protocols and consumer satisfaction reports.

Introduction

Older people in New Jersey had complained of a fragmented and confusing system of services, requiring program applicants to visit multiple locations and frequently repeat the same information. To address this problem, the state worked with county governments to create a statewide system whereby older people and their families could learn about and obtain local services with one call to a nationwide, toll-free telephone number.

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This report describes the New Jersey Easy Access, Single Entry (NJ EASE) system. It describes the system, how it functions, how it was implemented, and results to date. It is based on written materials produced by the State of New Jersey and mainstream media, and interviews with state staff involved in the implementation and oversight of the program.

Intervention

NJ EASE is a statewide initiative to provide an easy way for older persons to learn about and obtain services. People can now obtain county-specific information on a range of services for older persons by calling a nationwide toll-free number, 1-877-222-3737. Within New Jersey, the telephone system automatically recognizes the county from which the incoming call is being made, and transfers the caller to the single entry office for that county. Toll-free calls are accepted from elsewhere in the United States, and are

answered by staff of the state's Senior Helpline. Calls received between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. weekdays are answered by a live person; calls received at all other times are answered by a recording that provides hours of operation and a number to call for emergency services.

Through the NJ EASE toll-free number, a person can obtain information on a wide range of services; receive counseling about available public benefits; arrange for assistance; or make adjustments to services currently being provided. The first line of service is information and referral where callers receive information on programs such as the state's prescription drug benefit, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. More in-depth benefits counseling is also available to assist persons in determining if they might be eligible for certain means-tested benefits. Should a counselor be unable to answer any question, the caller is referred to an appropriate agency. The counselor will place a three-way call to the agency if necessary. People may also receive assistance in completing applications for services via the toll-free number.

For people who need more intensive assistance, in-home comprehensive assessments can be arranged to determine the need for long term support services. After the assessment, a care manager works with the person to identify and arrange for services to help him or her live in the community. Once in place, services can be adjusted over the phone or modified based upon regular in-home care management reassessments.

In implementing NJ EASE, the state has emphasized standardization in the nature and quality of services provided. In this vein, a standard, two-page Information and Assistance form is completed in each county for each caller that receives assistance. To streamline paperwork and prevent people from unnecessarily repeating information, this form comprises the first two pages of a standardized NJ EASE Comprehensive Assessment Instrument used to perform the in-home assessments described above.

Implementation

In order to participate in NJ EASE, each county had to first meet a set of state standards. To participate in the program, counties were required to identify a lead agency for the single entry system, as well as a lead agency for the toll free number.

Counties also needed to identify staff to provide core services and ensure that staff participated in state-sponsored training. Counties also needed to prepare a plan for educating the public about the services offered through NJ EASE. Finally, counties were required to submit plans for upgrading their computer systems to manage the information necessary to provide quick information and assistance. New Jersey state staff worked closely with the counties to provide training and assistance in overcoming various obstacles to implementation and standardization.

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New Jersey received external assistance in establishing this program in the form of a grant for \$238,251 from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in December of 1994, which was matched by \$400,592 in state funds. NJ EASE was implemented between 1996 and 2001. Throughout this five-year period, a handful of state workers provided training and technical assistance, county by county, until all 21 counties met the necessary criteria.

The mechanics of the toll-free number were put into place in about three months and the state budgeted approximately \$100,000 for implementation costs. State staff attribute the rapid implementation to very strong backing

from the Governor, who imposed a January 1999 deadline. Between January 1999 and 2001, the phone number was available only in counties that had met state NJ EASE standards. All counties have now met those standards, so the phone number is available statewide.

Technical and manpower problems emerged when the system was first launched. Some counties faced difficulties in integrating the new telephone system with existing systems. Heightened demand generated by prominent advertising (on the sides of buses, on television and radio, and in newspapers) caused manpower problems in some counties. These difficulties were overcome as bottlenecks in the system were worked out and demand leveled off.

The state and the counties monitored implementation of NJ EASE through various quality spot checks. For example, the state checked against efficiency standards such as whether the phone rings more than three times before being answered by a live person and whether the person answering was knowledgeable. Similarly, counties used various mechanisms for obtaining feedback on consumer satisfaction.

Impact

New Jersey has not yet measured the results of NJ EASE, but has developed statewide quality standards to measure results in the future. The state is currently pilot-testing these standards and identifying needed modifications, and plans to implement revised standards in December 2001. Examples of the standards include having counties implement consumer satisfaction surveys and develop annual improvement plans that draw on the results of the surveys. Eventually New Jersey hopes to use the standards to monitor quality within counties and compare performance across counties.

County program managers report that NJ EASE has resulted in more choices for older people. This improvement is due to the training and protocols that have been instituted as a part of NJ EASE. Counselors are more familiar with the range of services available under various grant programs and

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follow rigorous protocols in their interactions with older people and their family members. There is also more sensitivity on the part of counselors to the difficulties older people face in navigating the system. NJ EASE has increased awareness of services for older people, and now some counties have waiting lists for care management, whereas waiting lists did not exist previously.

Some Discussion Questions:

When a single entry point provides information about many types of services, how can a state ensure the information is accurate and up-to-date?

New Jersey has a relatively low number of counties (21). For states with more counties, would regional information and referral offices be more practical?

Contact Information

For more information about the NJ EASE, call Barbara Fuller, Program Manager for Information and Assistance at the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services at 609-943-3463 or Barbara.fuller@doh.state.nj.us. NJ EASE information is available online at <http://www.state.nj.us/health/senior/sanjease.htm>.

One of a series of reports by The MEDSTAT Group for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series will be available online at CMS' web site, <http://www.cms.gov>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.